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A dawning realisation

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ALL is not lost in the unequal battle against wanton destruction and denudation of our greenery. This onward march was slowed down a little recently when land clearance for a housing development project in Hulu Langat, Selangor, inadvertently caught the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The prime minister was returning home by helicopter from a trip to Taman Negara when he spotted the wholesale denudation. Once woken from their `stupor', the authorities swiftly took action. The result? This little corner of Hulu Langat - or a portion of it - once scarred and shorn of its jungle foliage, will be replanted with 12,000 trees by the developer.

This state of affairs should surprise no one. The `speed' with which the project was singled out and action taken should be viewed in the light of the greater battle being waged by environmentalists on a global level. Hardly had the United Nation's Earth Summit in New York concluded last month, when recriminations were voiced over how little was achieved despite the long and hard deliberations.

The week-long conference was convened to revive the `spirit of Rio' - the historic 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. A conference-ending consensus was reached whereby the more than 170 nations that attended it agreed to pursue sustainable development and work towards economic growth compatible with social justice and ecological safety. But many of Rio's lofty environmental and development goals are being eclipsed by 1997's hard political realities. Take foreign aid, for example. Most industrial nations pledged at Rio to boost assistance sharply to developing nations. Instead, aid levels have dropped. And in New York, summit negotiators made little progress in strengthening aid commitments.

At the Earth Summit in Rio, combating global warming was a key goal. Governments endorsed general policies of `sustainable development' - economic growth for all nations, with environmental protection. But in the end, non-binding, non-committal compromises were cobbled up in key areas concerning climate change, trade in timber and foreign aid. Summit chairman Malaysia's Tan Sri Razali Ismail, the UN General Assembly president, delivered this damningly blunt verdict of the New York summit: `Our words have not been matched by deeds.'

On home soil, how fare our environmental protection efforts? A number of major property and civil engineering projects proposed are raising concern among environmentalists. The Kedah government, for instance, has ambitious plans to reclaim land along its coasts that would have major implications for the ecology of its mangrove forests.

The Bakun dam project in Sarawak is definitely going ahead as planned but concern for its ecological effects have not been dampened completely. This is despite repeated assurance from the government that the amount of forest being cleared is but a small portion of what's left.

Perak is proposing new development projects which would change the character of its premier hill resorts. A proposal to develop Bukit Larut (formerly Maxwell Hill) and the Taiping Lake Gardens has been shelved after widespread criticism.

There is also the proposed 221 km road project which would link Genting Highlands, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands. The RM2.5 billion project is to connect the three resorts on the 500 km Main Range which forms the

backbone of Peninsular Malaysia.

Over in Penang, the famed Penang Hill has been slated for more development. All these projects would have a major environmental impact, considering the loss of biodiversity due to encroachment into vast tracts of virgin forests and the loss of jungle cover.

In Pahang, to aid the passage of boats on Tasik Chini and thus encourage tourism, a dam was built to raise the water level. It did, but to a level that resulted in the flooding of the surrounding forests, destroying an estimated 60 hectares of trees. Following an outcry led by the Press, the state government directed that the dam be reduced in height by 1.4 m. The unique environs of Tasik Chini appear to be saved.

But all is not gloomy. A number of initiatives are in place, showing that there is genuine desire to protect our fragile environment. The Wetlands Sanctuary Project in Kuala Langat aims to provide opportunities for local and international groups in conservation, research, recreational and educational efforts. The sanctuary is located next to the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) which would open up opportunities for it to contribute to the information age. The plan involves developing 5,000 ha of degraded tin mine land, logged peat swamp forests, large open lakes and the Kuala Langat Permanent Peat Swamp forest into a nerve centre of research and education activities.

There is much to look forward to with the 290,000 hectare Belum Forest in Perak. The Belum forest, a virgin forest reserve on the northern tip of the state, will be maintained as a wildlife sanctuary for which no logging will be allowed within its borders. During the first expedition in Belum in 1993 which took over a year to complete, it was discovered that the virgin tropical rainforest was endowed with rare species of flora and fauna not found anywhere in the world.

There are also initiatives being undertaken by various corporations and financial institutions to conserve and care for the environment. Banks appear to be in the forefront of efforts, giving cash donations for environmental causes or sponsoring research, conservation and other related activities such as the production of educational materials and the supply of dustbins. Hongkong Bank was the first private organisation to sponsor on-going programmes with the Fisheries Department to protect our coral reefs. (See accompanying story.)

Oriental Bank Berhad, meanwhile, in conjunction with the World Wide Fund for Nature, is promoting the sale of an array of greeting cards that deal with the conservation of nature. Public Bank's commitment to the beautification and greening of the environment is mirrored in its Taman Wawasan, a landscape garden completed in August 1993. Southern Bank, one of the first banks to launch Visa/MasterCard credit cards in Malaysia, donates part of the annual fee for credit cards to conservation efforts. To enhance awareness, knowledge and understanding of the marine environment among pupils, the Marine Education Kit - a joint project by World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia, the Department of Fisheries Malaysia and the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education which is sponsored by the Canadian High Commission, Hongkong Bank Malaysia Bhd and Prolink Development Sdn Bhd - is being introduced in primary and secondary schools. This teaching resource material consists of four units, namely, Mangroves, Seashores, Coral Reefs and Ocean & Seas, with each unit highlighting the functions of each habitat, the threats and the urgent need for marine conservation.

As Malaysia makes the leap into industrialised nationhood, the need to protect the environment will become more important. Balanced development will ensure the fruits of industrialisation can be enjoyed by future generations. Those who do damage in the process do so at their own peril.

The prime minister himself may be watching!
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